THE LEGACY OF THE TEACHER OF RIGHTEOUSNESS IN THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS*

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I. Introductory Questions

The present discussion is concerned with the legacy of an individual called the “Teacher of Righteousness,” who comes down to us as an anonymous figure frequently mentioned in the Dead Sea Scrolls. Those who composed and copied the documents which refer to the Teacher are often associated with the community that lived at Khirbet Qumran. It is by no means clear, however, that all the texts which mention this figure were actually composed during the time that the Qumran community occupied the site. Nevertheless, scholars interested in learning more about the origins and socioreligious history of the Yahad have sometimes gone to great lengths to investigate what can be known about his identity as a historical personage. Such an investigation, however, is anything but straightforward. The main difficulty is the indirectness and remoteness that characterizes the


1 This point holds true even for the Damascus Document; although some scholars have maintained that its setting does not reflect a community that had as yet settled at Khirbet Qumran, its correspondences with the Serek ha-Yahad, which is associated with the Qumran community, are unmistakable, and thus enhance the likelihood of social continuity behind these documents. For this perspective, see C. Hempel, The Laws of the Damascus Document: Sources, Traditions, and Redaction (STDJ 29; Leiden: Brill, 1998) and her discussion, “Community Structures in the Dead Sea Scrolls: Admission, Organization, Disciplinary Procedures,” in The Dead Sea Scrolls after Fifty Years: A Comprehensive Assessment (ed. P. W. Flint and J. C. VanderKam; 2 vols.; Leiden: Brill, 1999), 2:67–92; for a recent refutation of other interpretations regarding the relationship between these two documents, see H. Evans Kapfer, “The Relationship Between the Damascus Document and the Community Rule: Attitudes Towards the Temple as a Test Case,” DSD 14 (2007): 152–77.
relationship between the primary texts, on the one hand, and the historical Teacher, on the other. The Dead Sea texts, as I shall review below, are both fragmentary in themselves and distinct from one another, requiring close reading and inferential reasoning in order to account for the data without assuming that they must produce a fit as precise and smooth as the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. In addition, there are sources apart from the Scrolls which do not mention the Teacher at all, but which do offer accounts of the events during the second and first centuries BCE from which historical reconstructions of the events reflected in the Scrolls are frequently derived (e.g., 1 and 2 Maccabees and the writings of Philo and Josephus). The attempts to read the Scrolls’ references to the Teacher and the Qumran community in relation to these external sources has been a necessary step in helping to recover some aspects of Second Temple Judaism during the second century BCE that were unknown before the discovery of the Scrolls. As much as these attempts have shed light on our understanding of the Maccabean revolt and Hasmonean rule in Judea, the limits of this research have not always been formally recognized.

Given the predominantly historical interests among scholars, specialists have investigated texts which refer to the Teacher by asking primarily the following questions: (a) What personage mentioned among other Second Temple writings (for example, 1 and 2 Maccabees and the historiographical works of Josephus) might lie behind this enigmatic sobriquet?² (b) What “facts” can be reconstructed about the Teacher’s life and persona on the basis of the explicit allusions to him in the Damascus Document and the pesharim, and what do these details reveal about the temporal and social origins of the Qumran community and the phases of its development? (c) Which documents or portions of documents amongst the Scrolls, if any, may be thought to have been composed by the Teacher himself? These questions, notwithstanding their importance, are dominated by an interest in events and people recoverable behind the texts and are shaped by an essentially historical reading.

² Scholarly discussion of this question has been closely bound up with similar attempts to decipher other sobriquets applied to other figures in the writings of the Qumran community, such as “Wicked Priest,” “Man of the Lie,” “Ephraim,” “Manasseh,” “Seekers of Smooth Things,” “Furious Young Lion,” “House of Absalom,” “House of Judah,” and so forth.